

First Baptist Church  
379 Beale Street  
Memphis  
Shelby County  
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-181

HABS  
TENN.  
379-MEMPH  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C.

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

HABS No. TN-181

Location: 379 Beale Street, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee.

Present Owner  
and Occupant: First Baptist Church.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: This mid-nineteenth century church was the first brick church built in the South by Negroes for Negro worship. One of its earliest and most notable guest speakers was General U. S. Grant.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Variously given as 1863 or 1868.
2. Architect: Probably Edward Culliatt Jones (who arrived in Memphis in 1866); also attributed to Mathias Harvey Baldwin. Jones and Baldwin were partners for several years beginning in 1869.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The following chain of title may be established from the Register of Deeds of Shelby County.

1847 Deed July 3, 1847, recorded September 17, 1849 in  
Book 3 page 359  
South Memphis Company  
to  
Paul F. Villessigue

1849 Deed October 5, 1849, recorded November 7, 1851 in  
Book 8 page 511  
Paul F. Villessigue  
to  
E. Cheek, Obed Nicholson, E. F. Willis, A. L. Goff,  
Thomas Warburton, and H. G. Dent

1854 Deed September 25, 1854, recorded June 2, 1855 in  
Book 20 page 86  
E. Cheek, Obed Nicholson, E. F. Willis, A. L. Goff,  
and H. G. Dent  
to  
Beal Street Baptist Church (trustees)

1856 Deed December 3, 1856, recorded December 16, 1856 in  
Book 26 page 427 (additional 25' strip at back of lot)  
Samuel M. Jobe  
to  
Beale Street Baptist Church (trustees)

4. Alterations and additions: The interior was rebuilt after a fire in 1925. Its stone exterior was painted white in about 1964. (Other changes were not recorded at the time of this survey).

- B. Historical Context: Tradition in the congregation of the First Baptist Church states that it was founded in 1863 by newly freed slaves. When the present edifice was built there was almost certainly a black congregation and a white pastor; by 1872 the pastor also was black. Yet the site had been purchased in 1849 by and for a white congregation, variously called the Beal Street Baptist (1855) or the Second Baptist Church (1859) in Memphis City Directories. No evidence of a title transfer was located, although the property might have been recorded in the name of unknown trustees of the black congregation. Legend among the present membership relates that the early members "used wash pots and tubs to bring money to pay for the building and when counted it amounted to \$100,000.00." This is said to have been the first church built in the South by a black congregation for its use; certainly it was one of the most imposing.

An interesting feature of the church was a statue of John the Baptist on the east tower. It stood originally with both arms outstretched toward heaven. One night an inebriate climbed the tower and cut off the left arm. Thus it stood for many years, one arm still pointing upward; it was on several occasions struck by lightning. In August, 1938, the statue was knocked off the tower by careless workmen repairing storm damage. The galvanized body crumpled and was discarded, but the head proved to be fifteen pounds of lead; it was salvaged by one of the workmen to sell as scrap metal. Thus the head of Beale Street's John the Baptist, like that of the original, met an ignominious end.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This 19th century church is constructed of brick and has a simple rectangular plan. Its facade is built with corner towers and a decorative round window. There are a wood ceiling vaulting and galleries in the interior.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair. There is what appears to be surface deterioration but the building seems structurally sound.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The dimensions are 100 feet north to south and 56 feet east to west. The building is seven bays long (on the side elevations) plus the north towers at the front, and has a three-story exterior delineation. The plan is that of a rectangle.

2. Foundations: Brick.

3. Walls: The walls are constructed of brick and given an exterior finish of stucco which is scored to resemble cut stone. The exterior surface is painted white. An intermediate belt course is located at the first floor level to separate the plain walls of the ground floor from the upper two levels. The wall of the upper levels is articulated with recessed panels between pilaster-like projections.

On the north front there are two towers which terminate about 6'-8' above the roof line. The towers are divided into five levels with corbelled brick, set-backs and projections. There is a niche in each tower at the gallery level. The sides of the towers also have recessed panels. The surrounds for the panels are heavy in detail, made from stuccoed over brick projections.

4. Stairs: On the north front there are three sets of stairs to the main doors, each with seven risers.
5. Chimneys: A chimney is located on the west side of the church. It extends from the exterior wall. Above the roof it has a metal vent pipe.
6. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: There are three entrance arches between the towers on the north facade. Double wood doors fill each archway with each door leaf measuring 3'-2" x 10'-0" x 2-1/2" and having a diamond light set within a rectangular panel and a square panel with a wood pattern infill. The doors are topped with a semicircular arched window having colored glass in the oculi and the residual areas.

All other doorways have had new doors installed. Those on the west elevation formerly had semi-circular transoms and 2'-3" x 6'-4" x 1 3/4" doors.

- b. Windows: Ground floor windows are 3'-8" x 8'-0" and have 6/6 double-hung wood sash with flat headed openings. First floor windows are 3'-8" wide (splayed openings within measure 4'-6" wide) x 11'-0" high. They have wood double-hung sash and segmental arch openings with segmental arch surrounds. The sill height within is 3'-4". Second floor windows are 3'-8" x 6'-8-1/2" and have arched heads. Their interior sills are 17" above the balcony floor.

On the north front, above the triple portals, is a circular window composition. The center circle measures about 7'-4" in diameter and has eight circular windows about 3'-11" diameter surrounding it. High on the rear south wall is a 7'-6" diameter window set within a 15' diameter recess.

All glass to the upper portions of the building (first floor and balcony levels of the church proper) is colored.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The building is topped with a low profile gable roof, the ridge extending north to south. The surface is raised seam sheet metal.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The church proper occupies the first floor which is the "upper room." It is one large room with deep terraced galleries on the sides and rear, and a gallery passage across the south. A line of columns separates the galleries and "side aisles" from the "nave." At the rear of the church are a foyer and ushers' rooms. Behind the sanctuary are office and storage spaces. The "nave" is five bays clear (seven-and-a-half bays total in length); bays measure 14' x 14'; the width of the "nave" is 26'. Columns measure 12" square. The sanctuary is all new and is terraced up. The church hall is about 36' high.

The ground floor has a vestibule at the front of the building (north end). It gives access to symmetrically placed stairways and to the fellowship hall immediately below the church proper. The fellowship hall has a T-plan with the two voids filled with a meeting room (W) and a toilet and storage room (E). At the south end is a nursery and kitchen.

2. Stairways: There are two stairways to the first floor. They are symmetrically disposed to each side of the vestibule. There are twelve risers to a landing with a turn (to the left on the west side and right on the east) and nine more risers to the church level. Risers measure 7", and treads are 12" x 6'-11" wide.

Two risers from the landings give access to rooms located in the towers. From the first floor to the galleries there are stairways over the main stairs. Each has twenty-one risers (fourteen to a landing and seven to the gallery). Risers measure 6-1/4" and treads are 13" x 3'-11". Entrance is made to the lowest level of the gallery which is 3'-6" wide. There are three terraces of 3'-2"; 3'-2"; and 4'-4" (top). A railing 31" high protects the opening. On the north side the four terraces have about 7" risers.

3. Flooring: 3" floor boards run diagonally from the northeast to southwest. The galleries have 5" floor boards.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are of plaster applied to the brick walls. Wood ceilings are found throughout the church. The ceilings under the galleries follow the slope of the seating according to the timbers supporting the terraces. There are wood transverse arches (vaulting) spanning the "nave" and "side aisles." They have open spandrels. There is a 3'-4" wainscot with vertical board siding in the church hall.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Double swinging doors are located at the top of the stairways to the church foyer at the first floor. They are 3'-4" x 7'-5" x 1-1/2", but were cut down from 10'-0" high doors. They have four vertical panels. Small double-hung windows are to the sides of these doors and open into the stairway. Another interesting door is on the ground floor and leads into the toilet room below the east stairs. It is 2'-7" x 8'-6" x 1-1/4" and has a leaded clear glass panel. Other doors are typical.
  - b. Windows: (Not recorded).
6. Decorative features and trim: The columns and the transverse arches springing from them are interesting. They have bold lines with a lack of fine details, a result of the simple cutting of wood. The pews are of walnut and have carved end panels. The railings from the ground floor to the first floor have turned wood newels. The railings are solid with vertical board siding.
7. Hardware: Standard hardware is used throughout.
8. Mechanical equipment:
  - a. Heating: Unit heaters are suspended from the underside of the galleries.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building is located on the south side of Beale Street between Fourth and Wellington Streets. It faces north. The entire block on which the building sits has been razed for urban renewal. A high-rise apartment building occupies the northeast corner of the block. The remainder of the block is still vacant.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Property records. Register of Deeds of Shelby County, Tennessee.  
(No address given).

2. Secondary and published sources:

Commercial and Statistical Review of Memphis. Reilly and Thomas,  
1883.

Newspaper articles:

"Beale Street's John the Baptist Loses Head to Junk Man,"  
Memphis Press-Scimitar (September 6, 1938).

"Beale's Ancient First Baptist Grows," Memphis Commercial Appeal (October 26, 1964).

"One-Armed Saint of Beale Street," Memphis Press-Scimitar  
(March 1, 1935).

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This 1972 project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the West Tennessee Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed by Robert C. Giebner (University of Arizona), project supervisor, and Richard H. Hulan, project historian (Nashville).

Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer, took the photographs of the building in 1974.

The written data was edited in the Spring of 1985 by Susan McCown, HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, for transmittal to the Library of Congress.